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RV BUSINESS

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Oshkosh to Offer New Downsized 'A' Chassis

Oshkosh Truck Corp., a 72-year-old firm best known for its large concrete mixers and military equipment transporters, will take another step into the lighter-weight chassis business this fall with the planned production of a new downsized, Chrysler-powered chassis. The new chassis will complement Oshkosh's traditional high-line chassis and its new medium-duty rail, purchased in January from Moline, Ill.-based Deere & Co.

The Oshkosh, Wis.-based company will build the new low-profile chassis in the 10,000-pound gross vehicle weight rating range for both small motorhomes and commercial step vans. A vacant 25,000-square-foot U.S. Motors plant adjacent to Oshkosh's existing Wisconsin facility will house production of the new chassis, confirmed Bud Raupp, vice president and general manager of the firm's new chassis division.

The 50-employee Wisconsin plant, one of two new facilities announced by the company on March 25, is located close to major component suppliers, including Chrysler Corp.'s Acustar distribution center in Beaver Dam, Wis. "We're just in the engineering stages, with prototypes in the work," said Raupp, declining further comment on the new downsized rail. "We hope to be in production this fall."

The other new plant is situated in Gaffney, S.C., and will focus on the former Deere medium-weight chassis with three models and five wheelbases. Again, proximity of suppliers helped determine plant

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AFTERMARKET MERCHANDISING: Suppliers of four very different RV-aftermarket products advise dealers on how to lure customers with more sophisticated merchandising. See page 20.

Demand for Side Aisles Growing

U.S. motorhome enthusiasts have discovered the added privacy and livability features of side-aisle floorplans, interior layouts that were previously reserved for more expensive coaches. And more manufacturers of moderately priced Class As are responding with new living arrangements based on the side-aisle format.

The trend is apparent among many manufacturers, though some tend to downplay the popularity of side-aisles—which are most adaptable to larger motorhomes—as a passing fancy.

"It's not a revolution, but they are increasing somewhat," said Rees Noren, vice president of engineering for Coachmen Industries Inc., Elkhart, Ind., which currently has side-aisle models scattered across its divisional lines.

"It is a trend," confirmed Ron Frank, chairman of Frank Industries, Inc., which will begin offering side-aisle units in September when the Brown City, Mich., firm introduces revamped interiors for its 1990 Xplorer line of [illegible] motorhomes. "Trend[illegible]d go, and this is one t[illegible] o show some interest an[illegible]s sumers. But, I don't think it will make a motorhome any better—just different."

Also taking advantage of the shift in consumer tastes was Fleetwood Enterprises Inc., Riverside, Calif., which began offering side aisles in 1989 on its top-end Limited. And Winnebago Industries Inc., Forest City, Iowa, which started incorporating side aisles in its 1989 40-foot Winnebago Superchief and Itasca Suncruiser Class As, also has "a few more on the drawing boards" for 1990.

Elsewhere, Mobile Traveler Inc., Junction City, Kan., is getting into marketing side aisles as an option on its 34-footer,

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FEBRUARY WAS DISAPPOINTING

GAYLORD MAXWELL

February was a so-so month for RVB's Dealer Advisory Board (DAB). Compared with the corresponding month last year, members were up a few dollars in sales volume (but probably not enough to offset price increases) and down a few units. Sales were very similar to those in January, which is traditionally a relatively poor month. More than half of the DAB members took in fewer dollars than they did last February. Two very large dealerships were down, but, generally, larger dealerships fared better than smaller ones. Surprisingly for these times, dealers of towables fared better in terms of percentage increases than dealers of motorized.

Net profit ratings were about equally divided between good, fair and poor. Unit grosses apparently were rated good by about half of the DAB members; the other half said they were either fair or poor. Used grosses were holding up well; generally, they were good to excellent. The service-and-accessory business was fair to good.

New-unit inventories, as might be expected for this time of the year, were rated as high. However, used units tended to be on the low side (perhaps a problem for later). Lot traffic was rated low to average, while the percentage of new buyers tended to be about the same.

Year-to-date, overall sales volume was still up substantially (12%), but only seven of the 25 DAB members were up for the first two months. Obviously, the wealth was not equally shared. New units were up in all categories except truck campers. An unusual fact was that, for the two-month period, used-unit sales were down from the previous year. Weaker travel- and camping-trailer sales accounted for that.

Motorhomes

Motorhome dealers on the DAB were about equally divided between those who were up and those who were down in unit sales. Larger dealerships generally tended to be up, while the smaller ones lost a little ground. An almost universal complaint was that the motorhome business is getting tougher. Competition was incredible in some areas, and grosses were minimal.

Year-to-date, DAB motorhome dealers were ahead in new units over last year by a margin of 2-to-1.

Travel Trailers

The numbers were quite small, but this type managed to get into the new-unit plus column for the second month in a row, something that hasn't happened in quite some time. However, super sales by one DAB dealer accounted for the increase. Actually, of the 17 travel-trailer dealers on the board, more than half of them were down in new-unit sales.

There was no accounting for the dramatic drop in the used-unit business. It will be interesting to see if there's a reversal of that figure next month.

Truck Campers

This type of unit seemed to be having a bit of trouble in taking off this year. Perhaps our limited sample was not indicative of the overall picture, but it certainly suggested that there is no camper boom. Used sales were particularly off from the previous year. Apparently, those units that were sold brought good grosses, since profit ratings were good or excellent.

Folding Camping Trailers

Although new-unit figures were up substantially, they were somewhat misleading. One DAB member who sold no fold-downs in February of last year had a special sale of discount-purchased units and accounted for most of this year's increase. Of the regular camping-trailer dealers on the DAB, more than half were slightly down from last February. Still, the picture looks pretty good for this year. Used sales were off a bit. Profits were generally good.

Fifth-wheels

The minus figure for new fiver sales was most unusual. However, when we noted that there was only one unit difference from last February, then it wasn't so bad. Most dealers of this type were at about the same sales level as last February. Used sales were off one unit the other way. Profits generally were rated good or excellent. Year-to-date, in both new and used, it was obvious fivers were "alive and well." Δ

	NEW UNITS						USED UNITS					
	FOR MONTH			YEAR-TO-DATE			FOR MONTH			YEAR-TO-DATE		
	FEB. 1989	FEB. 1988	% CHANGE	1989	1988	% CHANGE	FEB. 1989	FEB. 1988	% CHANGE	1989	1988	% CHANGE
MOTORHOMES	149	160	− 7	307	277	+11	131	142	− 8	257	249	+ 3
TRAVEL TRAILERS	98	96	+ 2	189	172	+10	77	106	−27	146	173	+16
TRUCK CAMPERS	15	17	−12	26	30	−13	16	22	−27	23	37	−38
CAMPING TRAILERS	89	68	+31	154	132	+17	18	22	−18	24	30	−20
FIFTH-WHEELS	39	40	− 3	69	58	+19	24	23	+ 4	41	37	+11

	FOR MONTH			YEAR-TO-DATE		
	FEB. 1989	FEB. 1988	% CHANGE	1989	1988	% CHANGE
SALES VOLUME	$12,924,187	$12,660,140	+ 2	$25,346,003	$22,680,531	+ 12
TOTAL UNIT SALES	656	696	−16	1,236	1,195	+ 3
NEW-UNIT SALES	390	381	+ 2	745	669	+11
USED-UNIT SALES	266	315	−16	491	526	− 7

The "DAB Perspective" is a compilation of data provided by *RV Business*' Dealer Advisory Board, a group comprised of 25 dealers representing a cross section of the U.S. dealer body.

Gaylord Maxwell, chairman, **Dave Altman,** Baldwin Park, Calif.; **Bob Azevedo,** Sunnyvale, Calif.; **Jack Cole,** Pacoima, Calif.; **Dick Dasson,** Victor, N.Y.; **Crosby Forrest,** Newport News, Va.; **Dan Gamel,** Fresno, Calif.; **Jerry Greer,** Columbus, Ohio; **Jerry Harrison,** Waco, Texas; **Dottie Helgeson,** Seattle, Wash.; **Johnny Ketelsen,** Marion, Iowa; **Newton Kindlund,** Orlando, Fla.; **Roger Kirschner,** Salem, Ore.; **Ozzie Lenhard,** Sayville, N.Y.; **Larry McClain,** Oklahoma City, Okla.; **Annette Autry-Miller,** Fayetteville, N.C.; **Jack Moran,** Warwick, R.I.; **Wayne Peay,** Albuquerque, N.M.; **Ed Peterson,** Lafayette, Ind.; **Bill Pifer,** Warren, Mich.; **Tom Schaeffer,** Shoemakersville, Pa.; **Mel Shipp,** Chattanooga, Tenn.; **Jack Sisemore,** Amarillo, Texas; **Bill Thomas,** Bridgeton, Mo.; **Randy Thompson,** Crystal Lake, Ill.; **Larry Washburn,** Lakewood, Colo.

This report is an attempt to reflect the current retail sales picture; it does not purport to indicate RV production or factory sales to dealers.